Edmond Genet's Splendid War Letters

IN THE EVENING SUN of October 5, 1915, there appeared an article entitled *American Soldiers in France*, which said:

"The account between America and France, opened at the time of the revolution that gave us liberty, is being liquidated. In this war young Americans with the spirit of Lafayette have thrown their lives and their fortunes into the balance and, as this morning's despatches indicate, a number of them have been killed fighting in the French army.

"It is by a curious chance that among the names appears that of Edmond C. C. Genet of New York. Genet was the name of the Frenchman who came here over a century ago to plead that the United States take sides in the French war with England. By the wisdom of Washington the plea was disregarded. The young nation would have endangered its own life without being able to render any very substantial service to France.

"But standing apart from entangling alliances America has done better service by setting an example, and at times, as in the case of China, through mediation. And now her sons, fighting in the Foreign Legion, are paying the actual debt, man for man, incurred in the Revolution."

Letters of Fine Spirit.

The report that the young American named in the article had been killed while serving with the Foreign Legion was erroneous. He lived until the spring of 1917 to write *The War Letters of Edmond Genet*, which have been edited by Grace Ellery Channing and just published by the Scribners, with a prefatory note by John Jay Chapman giving an account of the youthful author's ancestry.

The volume containing these letters is a war book of more than ordinary interest and value. It gives the reader a series of pictures of the writer's everyday experiences and observations in the camp and in the field, constituting a contemporaneous record of events as they occurred under his own eyes, which will be most helpful to future historians of the great conflict endeavoring to reproduce in imagination the scenes of battle he witnessed on the earth and in the air.

A rare freshness of spirit pervades the letters which gives them a peculiar charm combined with a patriotic optimism which prevents the sadder passages from unduly depressing the reader. If one were making a select collection of books of the war he could not afford to leave out *The War Letters of Edmond Genet*.

Genet's Ancestry and Life.

The first member of the Genet family of distinction was Edme Charles Genet, who was secretary and interpreter to the Comte de Provence who subsequently became King Louis XVIII. Edme Charles had two children who became personages of consequence—a daughter, the Mme. Campan, who was governess to the children of Marie Antoinette and during the Napoleonic regime carried on a famous school for girls at which Hortense Beauharnais, the stepdaughter of Napoleon, was educated; and a son, known best in history as Citizen Genet, "whom the Revolutionary Government in France sent as ambassador to the United States in 1792 and whose indiscretions led to his recall. He never returned to France, but settled at Albany and subsequently married the daughter of Governor Clinton." Citizen Genet was the great-great-grandfather of the young aviator whose war letters are contained in the present volume.

Edmond Charles Clinton Genet was born at Ossining, N. Y., on November 9, 1896, and was killed in France on April 16, 1917, while engaged as a corporal pilot of the Lafayette Escadrille in an air combat with a superior force of German aviators. "Between the age of 16 and 20," says Miss Channing, "this predestined adventurer contrived to be present in three wars: He was at Vera Cruz (where he was the first to answer a call for volunteers for a dangerous landing party); at Hayti; in the Foreign Legion when that glorious force was all but annihilated, and finally culminated his career fitly in the famous Lafayette Escadrille." He was educated at public and private schools and at the Mount Pleasant Academy; an appointment to Annapolis, which he had been led to expect, went to another; and in his eighteenth year he enlisted in the navy.

After serving creditably in Mexican waters he returned with his ship to New York, and, neglecting the formality of obtaining leave to do so or a discharge from the navy, he departed for France, where he joined the Foreign Legion. In that corps, and finally as an American aviator in the French service, he rounded out a brief but beautiful life and was the first American airman to fall in battle flying the Stars and Stripes. He hoped to obtain and doubtless would have obtained a cancellation of the record of desertion from the navy, since he left the service as he did solely for the sake of fighting sooner. This is indicated by the letter from President Wilson, the Commander in Chief of the Navy, written to Mrs. Albert Rivers Genet shortly after her son's death. "I congratulate you from the bottom of my heart," wrote the President to his mother, "on the record which he made for himself, which must have mixed your deep grief with genuine pride."

Young Genet's naval service was chiefly in Mexican and West Indian waters. In a letter from Vera Cruz he describes the departure in May 1914, of the U. S. battleship Montana, bearing the bodies of the fourteen sailors and three marines who were killed in the fighting there—a sacrifice of brave men to no purpose. "It was a highly impressive sight to see her steam out slowly between the warships with all the ensigns at half mast, the bands playing the funeral march and all the crews standing along the decks of the ships, facing her with bared heads. If anything serious occurs here how many more of us will be carried back the same way?"

Picturesque Vera Cruz.

Fortunately the apprehension of further bloodshed was not verified. In the early morning, when the sun was just coming up, Genet thought that Vera Cruz, with its white houses, the old white walled fort in front and the lofty snow-capped mountains in the background, was the most beautiful piece of scenery he had ever beheld. In these his earliest letters the writer's artistic sense of the picturesque and his love of nature are already manifest. The only naval experience which he mentions with disfavor is the laundry work.

"I must close now," he writes at the end of one letter, "and get down below to do some strenuous scrubbing. Scrubbing dirty clothes on Saturday afternoon wouldn't appeal to me at all on the outside, but in the navy—well, it has to be done, so one gets used to it, and then really it isn't hard work anyway. I know one thing, though, and that is that when I get a wife she can darn my clothes, but she'll never wash them if I can prevent it!" His last duty in the navy was target practice, and he rejoiced in the excellence of the gunnery on his own ship, the Georgia, where the starboard waist turret scored twelve hits in twelve shots. "Surely no nation can beat the United States in heavy gun firing," was his final comment.

With the Foreign Legion.

Slipping quietly away in the French liner Rochambeau, Genet's fondest hopes for early fighting were soon realized after his arrival in France in January, 1915. He enlisted in the Foreign Legion on the 3d of February, and on the 26th of March he was writing to his mother from the very front line of the trenches with bullets singing and hissing all around and the Germans not 400 meters away. The crackling of a French mitrailleuse near by sounded like the explosion of a pack of Mandarin firecrackers.

Here his detachment remained for five days, firing at the enemy through the portholes of the trenches and receiving their return fire, after which he and his companions went back to their base for five days rest. When thus "in repose," as the French soldiers say, he was able to indulge in the love of nature he had brought from home, and he picked violets and daisies, "just as he used to do in old Ossining," and four leaved clover! He writes his mother: "What do you think of me finding twenty-seven four leaf clovers yesterday morning? I hope they bring me lots of luck. I never could find four leaf clover in the States, and I'm always picking them up over here." He also speaks of the great patches of periwinkles in the woods traversed by the Foreign Legion, and remembers that "Dad used to like to wear one or two in his buttonhole for church" in the old days at home.

In June, 1915, the Foreign Legion, including our young soldier of fortune, had a pretty hard time in the trenches. They were about up to their waists in mud and water. "It was misery in the nth degree. The following morning there were quite a number killed and wounded just because they couldn't keep out of sight on account of the depth of the water, while trying to clean it out." The sick list grew so large that Genet's detachment had to be relieved to enable them to regain their composure. A little later, on the longest day of the year, he writes of the brilliant weather and its effect on the outposts of both armies.

"It's funny," he says, "how every morning just about sunrise the sentinels of both sides have a morning's greeting to each other. Every one starts to crow like a rooster, and once in a while some French soldier or Boche will call across the field d'affairs 'Bon jour' or some similar greeting." He attributed these pleasantries to the welcome change in the weather. Exchanges of this sort were common enough between the Union and Confederate pickets in our own civil war, but in the present war the brighter aspects of humanity have found little expression on the battlefield.

Alone, He Carried On.

It was in the following September (1915) that the Foreign Legion participated in the great and successful offensive movement in Champagne—going into battle with 500 men and coming out with only 120 to answer roll call. In one advance "Genet kept on," says an eye witness, "until only one man of his company was left—the rest were dead or had taken refuge in the trenches." His companion then lost his self-control and consequently his life, and it was only by keeping his head under the most trying circumstances that Genet managed to escape. His description of the fighting in this offensive is the best thing in the book. It is contained in a long letter to his mother under date of January 19, 1916, and it would be difficult to find anywhere a more vivid picture of warfare under modern conditions. As he said elsewhere, writing to a young friend in America, "Oh, it's hell on earth, all right, and no mistake!"

Becomes an Aviator.

On May 31, 1916, Genet obtained a transfer from the Foreign Legion to the French aviation service and cabled to his family through Mr. Grundy of THE SUN for money to enable him to purchase his new uniform and necessary outfit. He wrote to his mother that he would far rather die as an aviator over the enemy's lines than find a nameless, shallow grave in the infantry, and in the end he died in the manner he preferred.

Six months of training was required to qualify him as a *Caporal pilote aviateur*. He received the finishing touches in his course of instruction in the aviation school at Pau, in the Pyrenees, and his letters reveal the delight he experienced in flying amid the magnificent mountain scenery of that region. In January, 1917, he began work in the field as a member of the Lafayette Escadrille and wrote home with enthusiasm about the lion cub which was the mascot of the corps. "We can take him up in our arms and fondle him," he said, "and while we are eating at the table he goes racing around the table from one to another and climbs up with his great clumsy paws on the table's edge to beg loudly for his share."

The first morning Genet went over the enemy's lines he ascended to a height of about 12,000 feet and was led to remark: "This is surely no kid's game." He found, as all fliers have to learn, that manœuvring the machine has to be done without conscious exercise of the will before one feels at home in the air. One cold day in March he lost his reckoning and his nose and one cheek were severely frozen before he could get back to camp.

His first savage encounter with the Boches was when James M. MacConnell, author of *Flying for France*, was killed. They came upon two enemy biplanes well within the German lines. Genet mounted to attack the nearest, leaving MacConnell, who was never seen alive again, to deal with the other. Genet drove off his own antagonist, but not until he got his guiding rod and one of his main wing supports cut in half, several bullets through his upper wing and half an explosive bullet through the side of his left cheek.

His Last Vow.

After it became certain that his comrade, MacConnell, had been killed by the Germans, Genet vowed vengeance against them. "I've already been told I was reckless in the air over the lines," he wrote, "but after this I vow I'll be more than reckless, come what may, mother. My blood boils and thirsts after those accursed Huns. They're brutes and fiends and daily they become worse." On April 15, 1917, he wrote that his citation for the Croix de Guerre had been granted, but he had not yet received it. "It will come very soon now." He was killed in action the next day while flying with the famous Lufbery.

We are often told nowadays that "the pomp and circumstance of glorious war" have gone out of modern warfare. However that may be, the adventurous spirit of chivalric souls still exists among the youth of America, and no better proof of it can be found than in the short life of Edmond Charles Clinton Genet.

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